

Frequently Asked Questions about the NRCS Organic Initiative

NRCS – Michigan

What is the NRCS Organic Initiative?

The NRCS Organic Initiative provides designated funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program for certified organic producers and producers transitioning to organic production. EQIP provides financial assistance for implementing conservation measures on agricultural land to protect natural resources.

Who is eligible to participate in the Organic Initiative?

Producers must meet eligibility requirements for the EQIP program and be a certified organic producer or be transitioning to organic production. Organic producers who are certification exempt because they have annual sales of \$5,000 or less are also eligible. Some EQIP eligibility requirements include being a qualified agricultural producer and meeting Farm Bill conservation requirements involving wetlands and highly erodible lands. Producers should visit their local NRCS office for more information about eligibility requirements.

What conservation measures does EQIP provide financial assistance for under the Organic Initiative?

There are a variety of designated practices for all types of operations that are eligible under the Organic Initiative. A list of these practices is available online at www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip. A list of these practices is also available from your local NRCS field office. Some of the practices eligible include: seasonal high tunnels, cover crops, conservation crop rotation, field borders, filter strips, windbreaks, mulching, pest management, prescribed grazing, composting facilities, and forage and biomass planting, to name a few.

What steps are there to applying for USDA programs?

Producers who have not participated in USDA programs before will need to verify that they meet eligibility requirements. These include complying with the USDA's wetlands and highly erodible land conservation requirements. Applicants will also need to document either ownership or control of the land they intend to enroll. Land must also have a farm and tract number assigned to it before it can be enrolled. The local conservationist will visit the applicant's operation to help develop a conservation plan and determine what conservation practices best meet the producer's needs. Producers should begin the application process early to avoid missing application cut-off dates.

How much financial assistance is provided through EQIP and how is it paid out?

EQIP pays a portion of the estimated cost of implementing a conservation activity. The producer receives payment after the conservation measure is implemented and determined to meet NRCS specifications.

Applicants who qualify as beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged or limited resource producers can receive a higher payment. These producers may also be able to receive a portion of the financial assistance before the conservation measure is implemented.

What is the advantage of applying for EQIP under the organic initiative?

Under the organic initiative a designated portion of each state's EQIP financial assistance is designated only for organic producers. Qualified applicants do not have to compete for EQIP funds with non-organic producers. Typically, Michigan does not have adequate funding to provide financial assistance for all EQIP applicants.

When is the sign-up period for the Organic Initiative?

Applications under the Organic Initiative, like general EQIP, are accepted on a continual basis. Cut-off dates are announced when applications are ranked and selected for funding. The cut-off date for 2013 applications Jan. 18. Producers are encouraged to start the application process well in advance of the cut-off date.

If my application is not funded this year can it be selected next year or do I need to re-apply?

Eligible applications will be kept on file should funds from other states become available during the same fiscal year. (The federal fiscal year ends on September 30.) Producers should update their applications before the next fiscal year to make sure that the conservation practices meet their current needs in addressing natural resource concerns. Rules, payment rates, payment limitations and practice availability may change from year to year so it is wise to take the time to review your application with local NRCS staff. Certain forms like the Adjusted Gross Income form must be updated for the year that you are applying for a USDA program as well.

Can organic producers receive financial assistance for EQIP practices that are not included in the Organic Initiative?

Organic producers may also apply for financial assistance through the regular EQIP program. However, their application will compete with non-organic producers.

How does NRCS determine which applications receive financial assistance?

Applications are ranked using national, state and local ranking criteria so that those with the highest environmental benefits will score the highest number of points. Applications compete against like applications in a state wide funding pool.

Will the Organic Initiative under EQIP be offered every year?

The Organic Initiative was established under the 2008 Farm Bill for a 6-year period beginning in 2009.

Is there a limit to how much financial assistance I can receive through the Organic Initiative?

Assistance is limited to \$20,000 per year and \$80,000 during a 6-year period.

Useful Links:

NRCS-Michigan Environmental Quality Incentives Program Web page:

www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip.html

List of NRCS-Michigan Field Offices

www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/Field%20Offices.html

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